

To Paint Their Lives: Women's Autobiographical Practices

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Classes: MW 12:30-1:50 Webster 220

Office Hours: T 3-5 or by appointment, 103 Webster

An Interdisciplinary investigation of women's autobiographical practices, this course will focus on how women across cultures and time narrate and represent their lives through various media and means. Though we will deal mostly with texts and paintings, we will try to include as much as possible other sources, such as movies, photographs, and music. We will engage in close readings and studies of the primary sources, as well as of pertinent theoretical works.

Among the authors and artists we will deal with are Artemisia Gentileschi, Li Qingchao, Sai Jinhua, Zora Neale Hurston, Charlotte Salomon, Theresa Cha, Rigoberta Menchu, and Trinh Minh-ha. Our exploration of female autobiographical practices will be read, when possible and meaningful, against the grain of male representations of women's lives.

Requirements:

The course is open to students interested in literature, art, autobiographical practices, women's and gender studies, regardless of area studies or disciplinary boundaries.

I expect you to have completed the reading assignments before coming to class.

Attendance and class participation are essential. The course will combine lecture and discussion and part of the final grade will be based on your participation, which involves presence, preparation of readings, and contributions towards classroom discussion. Late arrivals will be noted - three late arrivals count as one absence. You are allowed two absences, absences above and beyond that need to be explained in order to avoid an impact on the grade.

2) Assignments, presentations and a final project. Of course, you all swear to abide by the **Statement of Intellectual Responsibility** (please check <http://www.amherst.edu/%7Edeanfac/policies/sir.html>), don't you?

a) Written assignments and presentations (see syllabus for content and due date). Please note that additional assignments may be added. Check Blackboard for updates and announcements!

b) Your final project is meant to be your own investigation in autobiographical practices, especially from the point of view of gender. Thus you can choose to write a research paper (or as close to it as you can get), in which case I will expect you to write at least 10 pages, but not more than 15. I encourage you to choose a topic you are interested in for the final essay early on, so that you can develop your argument slowly and gently. I will

help you choose one in case you need inspiration, by handing out paper topic and personal consultation.

You can also choose to initiate a semester long autobiographical project, which can be carried out in any media you wish (i.e., painting, photography, poetry, dance, performance, video, textiles, diary, and so on and so forth). Depending on class size, all final projects will be presented to the class during the last two weeks of class.

Your final project is due on **May 14th**. Electronic submissions are welcome. If you are having problems with your writing, check the Writing center, they are wonderful people and can help you a great deal! Their website is <http://www.amherst.edu/~writing/>

The final grade will be based on the following criteria: attendance and participation, 30%; assignments and presentations, 40%; final project, 30%. All written work for this course must be double spaced and printed on a word processor.

Office Hours:

You are welcome and (really) encouraged to come and speak with me during office hours. This is important time to discuss more extensively the texts we are studying, the ideas we are exploring, or anything else related to the class. I strongly urge you to talk with me about difficulties you may experience with course related material and to make suggestions, so that we can all benefit from each other's insights and comments. If you are unable to come to the scheduled office hours, we can set an appointment.

Required texts (available for purchase at Jeffery Amherst College Bookstore):

Charlotte Salomon, *Life? or Theatre?*, CD rom (available for purchase at ALC)

First, Ruth, *117 Days, One Hundred Seventeen Days*, Monthly Review Press.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi, *Nervous Conditions*, Seal Press.

Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung, *Dictée*, Third Woman Press, 1995.

Satrapi, Marjane, *Persepolis*, Pantheon Books, 2003.

You will be able to pick up a reader with the additional required readings at Webster 110.

Schedule and Reading Assignments:

Week 1

1/26 Introduction to the course.

1/28 **Assignment #1:** Write a one-page outline of your autobiography, choosing also the media of your choice for this project. If you choose a medium other than writing, feel free to bring in sketches or whatever else illustrative material you need to present clearly your project to an audience (this provision will apply for all later assignments as well).

Week 2

2/2 The Language(s) of the Self 1

Readings: Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung, *Dictée*, Third Woman Press, 1995

2/4 The Language(s) of the Self 2

Readings: *Dictée*, continued.

Assignment #2: Write a two-page exploration of the language(s) you choose, both in your daily life and in exceptional circumstances, to express your self and to tell your story/stories. Try to consider questions such as: Why is a certain language and/or tongue more appropriate for conveying different sides of your Self? How much your intended audience determines the linguistic medium you will choose?

2/5 Screening of *Alphaville*, by Jean Luc Godard, 4 & 7,30 PM, 117 Fayerweather.

Week 3

2/9 Between Text and Context 1. In-class discussion of the following assignment:

Assignment # 3:

a. Write a diary entry on your names. What difference have they made? Do you like your names? Do other people? How did you get your names? Do your names match who you feel you are?

b. Write a diary entry about where you live. How has where you live made you who you are?

c. Write a diary entry about how you look. Do you like the way you look? Do other people? What adjustments have you made? How has your physical appearance affected who you are?

d. Write a diary entry about your inner self. Do other people recognize this inner self? Are you two/three/n people? If so, how do you reconcile them?

2/11 Between Text and Context 2. 1. In-class discussion of the following assignment:

Assignment # 4: Turn in a diary you will have kept for the past week in which only incidents are noted (no personal comments, reflections and the like are to be

included). Come to class prepared to discuss what narratives develop, what characters enter, and how events reveal character.

Week 4

2/16 The limits of writing.

Assignment # 5: using the material and the information accumulated in the course of preparing assignments 3 and 4, present the same information through a different medium: you can use images, dance, singing, drawing, and so on, as long as it is not writing. Come to class prepared to present your work to your classmates.

To help you and inspire you with this assignment, check out the following websites.

<http://1000journals.com/home.html>

http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/

<http://54boy.com/ziboyindex.htm>

2/17 Screening of *Rashomon*, 4:00 & 7:30 p.m, Fayerweather 117

2/18 *Interlude 1.*

In whose voice? Editing and Interpreting Autobiography. Interactive lecture

Week 5

2/23 The Fiction of Autobiography

Readings: *Nervous Conditions*, Seal Press.

Assignment #6: Find other examples, famous and or infamous, of fictional autobiographies and come prepared to present them to class.

2/25 CLASS CANCELED DUE TO CONFERENCE.

Week 6

3/1 Writing Bodies.

Readings: Nawal El Sadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*; Dirie, Waris, *Desert Flower*, *The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad*, in reader.

3/2 Screening of *Hidden faces*, 4:00 & 7:30 p.m, Fayerweather 117

3/3 Writing Bodies 2.

Assignment #7: Write/dance/create your own autobiographical narrative through a bodily narrative. In alternative, find other meaningful examples of autobiographical narratives that use the body as their reference point.

Week 7

3/8 The politics of Autobiography and Political Autobiography 1

Readings: Satrapi, Marjane, *Persepolis*, Pantheon Books, 2003.

3/10 The politics of Autobiography and Political Autobiography 2
Readings: First, Ruth, *117 Days*, *One Hundred Seventeen Days*, Monthly Review Press.

Week 8

SPRING BREAK!!

March 13-21, Friday-Sunday Spring recess

Week 9

3/22 Hush! Do we hear a Subaltern Speaking? 1
Readings: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, in reader.

3/24 Hush! Do we hear a Subaltern Speaking? 2
Readings: *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong*; *The Autobiography of Leonor Lopez de Cordoba*, in reader.

Week 10

3/29 A Picture and Ten Thousand Words 1.

Readings: Charlotte Salomon, *Life? Or Theater?*

Read at least the introduction and look at her paintings by Monday, and read the whole text by Wednesday. It is a lot of pictures, but very little text.

Assignment #8:

In the past few weeks we have seen how historical forces interact with autobiographical practices and how power-relations can determine them and the medium of autobiographical choice. The purpose of the assignment is to make you reflect on how one can map one's own autobiographical narrative when the power dynamics in one's life and times are so powerful to not leave you any other choice. As you write the assignment, focus on the way being given precise directives change and shape your activity, try to understand how it makes you feel and how these feelings in turn also come into play: is the autobiographical voice that comes through from your text still your own/ Why yes/not? How is the narrative that emerges different/similar from the one that would have appeared in the style and format of your own choice? Come to class prepared to discuss your assignment and these points.

Buying time

You have thirty minutes to write your autobiographical narrative in my office. If possible, come to my office on Monday, between 10 and 12, I will time you. If not, write me an email, and we will set up a time for you before then.

Borrowed tongue

You have to write your autobiographical narrative in a foreign language (truly foreign: not your native language/s-for example, if you are bilingual in English or Spanish, neither language will do). You can use a dictionary only if you are desperate. And no friends' help. Producing a grammatically correct text is not the point here. Maximum length: one page.

Trashing the Self

Create your autobiographical text using trash and waste. If you are using perishable waste, make sure it will not spoil by the time you have to present your assignment in class.

Headlines

Create your autobiographical text using news snippets from this and next week's news from the NY Times. Make sure you quote the day and section from which you are taking the news you will use. Maximum length: one page.

The Sound of Music

Create your autobiographical text using songs and music (stay within the boundaries of each musical genre assigned to you). Give complete references for each musical piece. Maximum length: 10 songs or movements. Ideally you can bring the complete music selection in class in CD format. Contact me if you have problems with this.

(Di)versifying the Self

Create your autobiographical text using lines from poems: maximum 2 verses from each poem for a total of twenty-two lines). If you decide to use foreign poetry (in the original or in translation) make sure you provide an adequate English translation. Give complete references (author, title and complete bibliographical references) for each poem.

3/31 A Picture and Ten Thousand Words 2.

Readings: Charlotte Salomon, Life? Or Theater?

Week 11

4/5 I-magining your Self.

Assignment #9:

Group A

Using ONLY visual means (you can use writing as well, if you wish, but you must do so in a visual manner, where is writing as image, and not as text, that is privileged), present your life story in a format that can be presented in class. Come prepared to present and discuss your choices.

Bergman, Sarah; Bredy, Anderline; Blanton, Jessica; Lewis, Hilary; Colon, Kaleena; Hamlin, Kathryn; Heig, Nicole; Jennings, Karen; Martinez, Melissa; Park, Eunee; Squire, Alison; Zukiewicz, Marykate.

Group B:

Find examples of women painters and artists who used/use visual means to engage in an autobiographical project. Bring the material (visual and non visual) to class prepared to give brief presentation about the author, her work, and why and how you chose her.

Crowell, Jeanette; Dominguez, Natalie; Dowd, Courtney; Durwood, Emily; Guzman, Esmeralda; Patrick, Jenelle; Rodriguez, Demma; Ryu, Nakyung; Shackridge, Karen; Tam, Jade; Tsai, Eugenia; Wheeler, Caroline.

4/6 Screening of *Surname Viêt, given name Nam*, 4:00 & 7:30 p.m, Fayerweather 117

4/7 *Interlude 2.*

The Matter with Gender. Interactive lecture.

Week 12

4/12 Writing Bodies 3. Making Sex Work. The Life of a Nineteenth century Chinese Courtesan.

Readings: Sai Jinhua, *The True Story of Sai Jinhua*, in reader.

4/14 Writing Bodies 4. Making Sex Work.

Readings: Sai Jinhua, *The True Story of Sai Jinhua*, in reader.

Assignment #10: Convey, through pictures, writing, painting, what you think is involved in making a life out of selling one's body. Alternatively, write a two-page essay about other courtesans' and sex-workers narratives analyzing how they compare to Sai Jinhua's story. Come to class prepared to discuss your assignment.

Week 13

4/19 The Tongue of Ecstasy 1

Readings: *Lady of the Lotus-born. The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe-Tsogyal*, in reader.

4/21 The Tongue of Ecstasy 2

Readings: Teresa, of Avila, Saint, 1515-1582, *The Book of her Life. Spiritual Testimonies*, in reader.

Week 14

4/26 In class presentations

4/28 In class presentations

Week 15

5/3 In class presentations

5/5 In class presentations/exhibit of art work in Webster.

Final Project due MAY 14th